



Australian
Koala
Foundation

A.C.N. 010 922 102

Tuesday, 10 March 2009

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Queensland Government 'Slap-dash' Mapping Set to Fail Koala

The Australian Koala Foundation (AKF) has warned the Queensland Government's new koala habitat mapping project will expose the South East Queensland koala population to extinction.

AKF CEO Deborah Tabart OAM said the Queensland Government recently employed engineering consultants to undertake 'extensive' mapping of koala habitat in South East Queensland; mapping intended to assist in the species' protection. The project, worth nearly one million dollars did not go to tender, even though other consultants could have competed for the work.

"Sadly, the methodology is significantly flawed and will leave surviving koalas and habitat without any protection in this fast-growing region," Ms Tabart said.

The method involves the creation of a koala sightings dataset from which maps will be generated.

However according to AKF scientist Dr Douglas Kerlin, because koalas are tree-dwelling and occur over low densities, they are extremely difficult to observe.

"A survey method focusing on more permanent 'signs' of koala activity, for example droppings, would be much more thorough," Dr Kerlin said.

Ms Tabart is concerned about the implications of assuming areas of habitat are devoid of koalas using the koala sightings methodology.

"When you declare koala habitat to be empty, you open the door for land clearing for development.

"For instance in the Redlands, good koala habitat that is now empty has no chance of protection under this mapping methodology. It is ridiculous," Ms Tabart said.

"We have to ask - why is the Queensland Government creating a new methodology when a sophisticated, well-tested and far more accurate methodology is already on hand?"

Ms Tabart is referring to the AKF's largest and longest-running project; the Koala Habitat Atlas which is recommended as a basis for the accurate identification and mapping of koala habitat within both the New South Wales and Victorian State Governments.

"The Koala Habitat Atlas maps all biodiversity irrespective of land tenure," she said. "I think this scares the Queensland Government and explains why they manipulate and create new methodologies intended to confuse and sanitise the land."

"The ironic thing is that AKF could give them these maps tomorrow," Ms Tabart said.

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The South East's koalas are just the beginning of Tabart's concerns. If the new Queensland mapping methodology goes on to be adopted as the national mapping standard for the National Koala Conservation Strategy, she fears koala protection will be impossible. "Habitats falsely deemed 'empty' and areas capable of recovery will be ignored."

The AKF is now calling on the Federal Government to assign the South East Queensland koala population 'Critically Endangered' status.

To find out ways to help the Australian Koala Foundation save our koalas, visit the website at www.savethekoala.com.

- ENDS -

- **Interview opportunities: Deborah Tabart OAM, ph 0407 750 668**

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Backgrounder

- The mapping method currently being used by engineering consultants employed by the Queensland Government's involves the creation of a koala sightings dataset from which GIS-based maps will be generated. Habitat predicted to have koalas (but lacking in associated sightings records) will be surveyed over an eight-week period.
- Major flaws in the current Koala Mapping Project SEQ include:
 1. Inherent bias in the sighting data used to map locations of koalas, resulting in the data not being representative of true koala distribution.
 2. Insufficient time allocated to conduct a proper survey of those areas of the region under-represented in the sightings data.
 3. Visual surveys inappropriate, due to difficulties associated with observing koalas in the wild, particularly in high density forest.
 4. No formal methods implemented to identify individual range (ie more permanent signs of koalas including faecal pellets) as opposed to a transient and chance spotting.
- The Australian Koala Foundation's (AKF) Koala Habitat Atlas has been developed and refined over a period of more than 15 years. The national GIS-based project covers over four million hectares with project areas spanning South East Queensland, much of Eastern and Central New South Wales down to Ballarat Shire and the Strzelecki Ranges region in Victoria.
- The AKF's Koala Habitat Atlas methodology received a prestigious Computerworld Smithsonian Institute Award for innovative use of technology in Washington, DC in 1998.
- Despite the proven merits of the Koala Habitat Atlas, Ms Tabart believes the AKF's offers of assistance are falling on deaf ears. "What's missing is the involvement of landscape ecologists and experts in koala habitat mapping. New mapping efforts should not be limited to the views of reproductive biologists, particularly those with conflicts of interests (representing development interests) as we're now seeing in Queensland."
- The project, worth nearly one million dollars did not go to tender, even though other consultants could have competed for the work. Tabart also said this failed to comply with official guidelines "but that's another story."

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